

The Role of Religion in Information Operations

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"The easy confidence with which I know another man's religion is folly teaches me to suspect that my own is also." -Mark Twain

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Opinions abound regarding what motivates insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some discuss the issue in detail without mentioning religion. Others blame religious intolerance directly. Whichever side of the argument one takes, religious certainty and the confidence it breeds impedes progress toward peaceful coexistence. Religious factors effect military information operations (IO), but by what means should these factors be addressed? Acceptance of, real respect for, and eventual military cooperation with individuals of different faiths requires very liberal interpretations of one's own religious doctrine. There is nothing more difficult than convincing a person to doubt something he or she needs to believe. The U.S. Military Chaplain Corps could potentially lead the way, but first they must be screened to ensure they are willing and able to set aside their own personal religious certainty and to make liberal interpretations of their doctrine in favor of that end.

What is the problem?

Religion, and specifically Christianity, is unwavering in its doctrinal requirement for absolute faith from its flock. Doubt is sufficient grounds to secure a place in hell. The degree to which a person is certain of the truth

of his or her religion's message is the ultimate measure of likelihood to get into heaven. It is not deeds, but it is sincere acceptance of Jesus Christ (to Christians) as lord and savior that will be awarded with eternal life. There is an obvious conflict of interest when one considers a chaplain's requirement to believe that his or her God is the one true path to heaven while sincerely advocating respect for people who believe in other Gods. H.L. Menken said "we must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart." To do this sincerely, exceptions must be made. Credulity cannot be absolute.

Chaplains do surprisingly well.

Within a given organization, chaplains successfully manage to provide one-on-one *spiritual* guidance to people of all faiths. During large gatherings, however, where attendance is often mandatory, chaplains alienate members of other faiths and boldly affirm the organization's Christianity. Surely they mean well, but in their attempts to cater to the majority, chaplains are often a party to the perpetuation of the Christian attitude of supremacy that permeates the U.S. military, and they miss an

opportunity to foster enhanced understanding and tolerance. The mere mention of the Christian God, indeed prayer in general, will invariably alienate some of those in mandatory attendance. To imagine the alienation and to view the issue from a non-Christian perspective, one need only imagine listening to a Muslim mullah delivering an Islamic blessing at the next change of command ceremony.

The problem is prevalent.

This ignorance of military multi-religiosity permeates all U.S. military organizations, and is largely unintended. There are Muslims in the Marine Corps, but one would never guess this was the case by the ridicule and condescension with which Islam is regarded by many public speakers who are given the privilege of addressing large crowds of service members. Radical Muslims are generally considered to be senseless and uneducated. Suicide bombers are regarded simply as insane, and for their belief in an afterlife full of virgins they are considered delusional. Videos of improvised explosive device (IED) detonations are viewed as appalling while U.S. weapon system footage that obliterates human bodies brings universal smiles to the faces of U.S. military viewers, and often even jubilant cheers. The more blood and guts the better, so long as it

enemy guts. Americans, this American included, show no remorse, and seem to find no comparison between themselves and the barbaric insurgents. What is worse is that few readers will have any issue with the hypocrisy described thus far. Regardless of the justification, what have professional fighting men and women become if in hindsight they are not at least *openly*¹ regretful that a situation called for killing? What is the reason for this blindness in the attitudes of U.S. military men and women, and how can it be fixed?

The problem is religious certainty.

Chaplains are obviously welcome to their *personal* religious certainty, as are individual military members, but if that certainty can be found to conflict with what is best for this nation, then a need for change will have been highlighted. Chaplains should start by catering *publicly* to men and women of varying *degrees* of faith, not just varying faiths. They should admit that doubt is natural in matters of religious faith. If any chaplain can be found to have even so much as a slight conflict of interest, or unwillingness to do this, then he or she should be

¹The writer has no illusions about the regrets service members often keep to themselves.

concurrently found unsuitable to lead the charge in this country's quest for global religious harmony. To determine whether chaplains are up to the task, and if the task is even deserving of attention, one must first understand the situation.

What are we doing now, and is it the best we can do?

Current IO strategies advocate *conversion* of moderate Muslims to a more western ethos through the spread of democracy and capitalism, and destruction of radicals.² In this way, counterinsurgency operations (COIN) share a common desired end state with insurgent operations. Conversion of non-Muslims to Islamic faith is the radical Islamist's goal. That conversion, if not by cooperative means, can happen forcibly by killing the non-conformist in much the same way coalition forces destroy radicals. The result is that to the world the west appears to share the radical Muslim view that destruction and conversion are the only options for non-conformists, and what the world sees effectively equates to the U.S. strategic position. The U.S. should be able, at least, to initiate a higher level of discourse than the current supposed convert-or-die

² Col Thomas X Hammes "The Message is Insurgency" Marine Corps Gazette. Nov 2007 Vol. 91 No. 11 Page 28 Figure 1

policy. Some parts of the world see only Christians killing Muslims by the thousands, and it does not matter whether or not the official U.S. position is that this is Holy war. That is, beyond any doubt, the official radical Islamic position.

What is strategic IO and why isn't anyone doing it?

Information operations are often under-planned and largely misunderstood. Strategic communications has a slant toward the strategic level of war and some consider it more suited to the issue. Col Thomas X. Hammes, states that "astute practitioners on both sides of the conflict have reached the conclusion that the key weapon of insurgency is a strategic communications campaign."³ Often what is employed under the guise of information operations certainly is closer to the limited subcategory of strategic communications, but strategic communications are not the doctrinal foundation of a COIN operation. Currently, IO is the doctrinal foundation of a COIN operation, and it should remain as such.

The U.S. military's definition, or at least employment, of IO has yet to be adequately established, so significant room exists for improvement in strategic IO.

³ Hammes, 18

This does not mean that IO should be utterly replaced by one of its many subcomponents. IO is defined as follows:

The integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, psychological operations, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.⁴

Its doctrinal purpose is "to affect enemy decision makers while protecting friendly decision makers from adversarial influence."⁵ So, on the surface IO has no vehicle for strategic influence, a definition focused on tactical elements, and a purpose lacking specific focus on any particular level of war.

Only upon more in depth review of the core capabilities does doctrinal guidance for strategic level IO employment become clearer. The definition of psychological operations offers one example. They are "planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objectives, reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign *governments, organizations, groups, and*

⁴ "Information Operations." *Joint Publication 3-13* February 2006: 112. http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_13.pdf.

⁵ *Joint Publication 3-13*, 88

individuals.”⁶ Nothing is linked more directly than Islamic faith to the emotions and motives of potentially troublesome Muslim governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.

Reinforce tactical successes and modern developments in the Muslim world with strategic IO.

Tactical successes are witnessed on the streets and in the villages and marketplaces of Iraq and Afghanistan where U.S. and coalition forces are gaining ground by touching the lives of as many locals as possible. They directly demonstrate western humanity and commonality. Recent Pew poll results suggest Muslim support for suicide bombing in defense of Islam has seen widespread and rapid decline. In all areas where polling was allowed, except the Palestinian territory, the number of Muslims who agreed that suicide bombing was justified in defense or support of Islam is lower this year than in 2002 by an average of approximately 25%. Unfortunately in Palestine support is still a disturbing 70%.^{7 8} Never the less the preponderance of the results appear to indicate spreading moderation in the Muslim world. Yet to date there has been no public fatwa

⁶ Definition available at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/p/04364.html>.

⁷ See Figure 1

⁸ Pew polling was not allowed in the most radical Muslim states.

issued against Osama Bin Laden by any Islamic mullah. Nor has there been any public call for any such fatwa by an American religious leader.

But religious beliefs are personal.

If one believes the polls, the majority of eastern and western societies both still share a faith in a being greater than themselves. And while one person's religious faith is indeed a deeply personal matter, the religious majority he or she contributes to has huge sway in matters of national strategy and policy. IO doctrine already accounts for this fact. "Service-wide training of military personnel should account for the nature of the information environment and the fact that the actions of individual personnel can affect the perceptions of foreign populations."⁹ Significant common ground goes unnoticed because religion usually is a conversation stopper between people of different views. By openly admitting a small amount of religious uncertainty, both parties may move one step closer to peaceful coexistence, not to mention moving closer to a more intellectually defensible stance on the matter. While the execution of information operations itself has yet to be mastered in the U.S. military, truly

⁹ *Joint Publication 3-13*, 73.

learning more than one language of faith could help its cause.

But socio-economic factors are more important.

The most tactically important factors are already being addressed in the Global War on Terror. The link, in a given region, between reduced insurgent violence and increased gross domestic product cannot be denied, and that bottom up approach is viable. These efforts are not met with top down strategic reinforcement through religious discourse that would serve to enhance the endurance of the socio-economic successes. Such factors as jobs and standards of living, while obviously immediate to the tactical fight, are far less salient to the long war than religious conviction. Suicide attacks are not confined to the poor or uneducated. Fixing economies will not stop the concept of martyrdom. Most of the September 11, 2001, hijackers were college educated and financially well-situated. Yet they did not hesitate to destroy themselves in the name of their God and for the promise of post mortem paradise. Without strategic efforts to sway radical Islamic state policy makers, Imams, the U.S. should expect long-term resurgences of violence in these regions. To do this, U.S. strategists will have to put global opinion

ahead of U.S. voter opinion and develop new methods of addressing religion.

The chaplains can't do it all.

Because of their own faith, chaplains must be considered biased in an endeavor toward reaching religious middle ground. It is perhaps also beyond the reach of the Chaplain Corps to strategically exploit the emerging new level of worldwide receptiveness to candid religious discourse that has gone largely unnoticed. The previously mentioned pew poll results are promising. Since 2002, belief among Muslims that suicide bombings are justified has dropped dramatically. This data must be studied, and the cause must be understood and exploited. Whether or not they answer "Christian" when polled, religion is not central to the lives of westerners. Love it; hate it, or choose to ignore it, religion weighs heavily on the minds of would be insurgents and their leaders.

2002 Words

Fewer Muslims View Suicide Bombing as Justified

Often/ sometimes justified:	<u>2002</u> %	<u>2007</u> %	<i>02-07 change</i>
Lebanon	74	34	-40
Bangladesh	44	20	-24
Pakistan	33	9	-24
Jordan	43	23	-20
Indonesia	26	10	-16
Tanzania	18	11	-7
Nigeria	47	42	-5
Turkey	13	16	+3
Palestinian ter.	--	70	--
Mali	--	39	--
Malaysia	--	26	--
Kuwait	--	21	--
Ethiopia	--	18	--
Senegal	--	18	--
Morocco	--	11	--
Egypt	--	8	--

Based on Muslim respondents.

Figure 1

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